



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

**Review of Susan Beechey, Social Security and the Politics of Deservingness, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, 122 pages, ISBN: 978-1-349-91889-8.**

### Citation for published version:

Gulland, J 2017, 'Review of Susan Beechey, Social Security and the Politics of Deservingness, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, 122 pages, ISBN: 978-1-349-91889-8.', *European Journal of Social Security*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 369-370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1388262717746208>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/1388262717746208](https://doi.org/10.1177/1388262717746208)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

European Journal of Social Security

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Susan Beechey, *Social Security and the Politics of Deservingness*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, 122 pages, ISBN: 978-1-349-91889-8.**

This important book is based on an analysis of debates on social security in the United States in 2005. At first glance this may seem to speak only to a particular period in a particular country but the book has much wider significance in helping us to understand the often unspoken assumptions about the nature of social security.

Beechey's work analyses Congressional debates on the proposed privatisation of the US (insurance based) Social Security scheme in 2005. Readers may feel overwhelmed at the prospect of reading a detailed analysis of a debate now more than ten years old. However, this book takes the reader carefully through the background and outcome of the debate, focussing on the language, narratives and assumptions behind it. Beechey's analysis shows that uncovering these assumptions can be at least as revealing as focussing closely on the outcome or the politics of policy development.

Beechey shows that insurance-based social security is inherently gendered (through the male breadwinner model) and racialized through definitions of eligible 'work' as the kind of jobs carried out by white men, rather than black men, or by women of any ethnicity (p. 6). She focusses mainly on retirement and survivors' pensions and shows that these pensions are highly segregated by gender, age, race and class, albeit portrayed as universal. Actual payments are differentiated by gender and race because of different patterns of earning in a lifetime, leading to white men receiving the highest average payments and Hispanic women the lowest (p. 30). This serves to underline how these different patterns of formal and informal wage earning are central to the differentiated outcomes of social insurance schemes.

Demographic changes have led to concerns about how to finance the scheme in the future, including, for example, raising the retirement age, cutting levels of benefit, or, driving the debate in 2005, privatising the scheme and replacing it with an individualised investment-based system.

Beechey's analysis of the debate on this proposal is illuminating in showing that social security was envisaged by both sides in the political debate as 'an unbreakable promise', 'earned' by hard-working male manual labourers who 'built the nation' and their deserving widows, depicted as caregivers who continue their caregiving role beyond 'retirement' and into

Gulland, J. (2017) Review of Susan Beechey, (2016) *Social Security and the Politics of Deservingness*. In *European Journal of Social Security* AUTHOR FINAL VERSION

advanced old age. These depictions of social security recipients are entrenched in particular views of family formation, based on heterosexual marriage for life. In the debate in Congress, both male and female politicians told stories of their fathers and grandfathers (black and white) and their hard manual labour or war service, deserving a pension in their old age. This might seem surprising for politicians whose own working lives would be far from this stereotype but a contrasting story was also told about white male ‘survivors’ (young recipients of payments on the premature death of their fathers) who had benefited from the system to go to college and to cross the class divide. Beechey notes that different stories were told about older white women, almost always portrayed in retirement rather than as former paid workers, baking, looking after grandchildren and contributing to the community. Black women, on the other hand, appeared in the narrative as former workers, women who had worked hard in the paid labour market to hold their families together through hard times. Beechey also notes the ‘silences’, the absence of particular kinds of stories, crucially, that there were virtually no mentions of fraud or undeservingness in the debate. The sole exception to this were the negative reactions to a narrative of ‘greedy geezers’, old people feeding off the futures of their grandchildren (p52). Observing this silence, and this one exception, enables Beechey to highlight the overwhelming positive depiction of recipients of social security as deserving.

The narrative in the Congressional debate changed regarding the future. Here the narratives concerned the politicians’ children and grandchildren and their futures: ‘my 3.5 year old daughter, my 22 month old son’ (p91). Beechey notes the careful switch in focus from the deserving old to the deserving young, which avoided demonising current recipients of social security. While this shift was cleverly hidden, it opens up the possibility of changing attitudes as demographic change puts pressure on the system.

The final chapter, ‘Social security tomorrow’, speculates on likely developments in the social security debate. Written during the early stages of the 2016 Presidential election campaign, at a time when the prospect of a Trump presidency was so unlikely as to not be worth mentioning, this chapter seems dated. This is not a criticism but a danger inherent in this kind of chapter. The book concludes with a speculation that the politics of deservingness may not hold. There are few references to disability insurance benefits in this book, as the focus is on retirement and survivors’ pensions. The politics of deservingness has already turned a corner with disability benefits. Beechey asks whether older people are next on the list.

This book is written in a readable and convincing style although the format where each chapter starts with an abstract written in the third person is a little confusing and loses the flow of an otherwise engaging text. This style used by the Palgrave Pivot series is clearly aimed at a digital readership where readers may only read one chapter rather than the whole book. This may work for some readers but for me, it was distracting rather than helpful. The book is better read as a whole.

Generally this book provides an insightful analysis of the ways in which social security policy is framed. Careful analysis and discussion of the debates in Congress show a clear pattern of race and gender. The overall point that insurance-based pensions reflect inequalities in working lives is not new but cannot be too often repeated. The perceptive use of data from the Congressional debates sheds a revealing light on how hidden assumptions frame debates on this key area of social security. This approach is a valuable reminder to all social security scholars and students to look beneath the surface.

**Jackie Gulland**

*School of Social and Political Science*

*University of Edinburgh*

---

Dr Gulland has a PhD in social policy from the University of Edinburgh, where she is a lecturer in social work. Her research is broadly in the field of socio-legal studies and she has carried out work on citizens' grievances and social security policy, with a particular focus on disability and social care. Her current research concerns the history of the concept of 'incapacity for work' in social security from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.